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Crush the Sunnis

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By James
Kurth

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Iraq: What Next?

U.S. troops must leave Iraq--but not just yet, and not in the manner many Democrats have suggested. Islamists in general, and Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda in particular, are always pointing to past U.S. military retreats--Vietnam in 1975, Lebanon in 1984, Somalia in 1994--as evidence that the American will to wage war invariably collapses as conflicts drag on. As a result, retreating from Iraq now would simply encourage Islamists to attack U.S. allies and targets throughout the world. Before it leaves Iraq, then, the United States must inflict a dramatic and decisive defeat upon the Sunni insurgents--one that will demonstrate the unbearable cost and utter futility of the Islamist dream of establishing a Muslim umma under the rule of a global Sunni caliphate. That defeat must be more than military; it must also be political: The United States should divide Iraq into two parts, leaving the Kurds in control of the north, the Shia in control of the south--and the Sunnis stateless in between.

The Sunni Arabs of Iraq have much to answer for. Since they have always made up a rather small minority--about 15 to 20 percent of the country's total population--the regimes they created were historically authoritarian ones. They compensated for their small base by employing especially brutal methods against their Kurdish and Shia neighbors. Successive Sunni governments became steadily more repressive, leading eventually to the rule of the Baath Party and culminating in the ferocious regime of Saddam Hussein.

Baathist Iraq was often compared to Nazi Germany: Saddam was said to play the role of Adolf Hitler and the Baath Party that of the Nazi Party. A more accurate comparison, however, would analogize the Baath Party to the Waffen S.S., the Nazi Party's elite unit, and the Sunni Arab community to the Nazi Party as a whole, which eventually made up as much as 15 percent of Germany's population.

But, unlike their Nazi counterparts in Germany in 1945, the Sunni Arabs in Iraq in 2003 were not totally defeated, devastated, and demoralized by the time their government was toppled. Consequently, they were soon able to initiate and support a vicious insurgency. Even now, when Shia militias are taking their revenge on the Sunni community and only the U.S. military stands in the way of its decimation, opinion polls show that nearly 90 percent of Sunnis approve of insurgent attacks on U.S. troops.

Many commentators have suggested partitioning Iraq into three states--Shia, Kurdish, and Sunni. This would be a good solution in many respects (analogous to the partitioning of the former Yugoslavia), except that any Sunni state would be dominated by an Islamist regime created by the insurgents, who would claim that they had defeated and driven out the U.S. military and would continue to inflict murder and mayhem upon their Shia and Kurdish neighbors. This is why the Sunnis have to be subordinated so that they have no state at all. The result would be an Iraq partitioned into two states--a Shia one in the center (including Baghdad) and the south and a Kurdish one in the north.

Critics of this proposal would no doubt point to the likely reactions of Iraq's neighbors. Wouldn't a Shia state in Iraq simply become an ally or even a puppet of Shia Iran? This would undoubtedly be the case for a few years. But Arabs are unlikely to accept long-term domination by Persians, whatever their religious commonality. An Arab Shia state in Iraq would ultimately become an independent actor (perhaps like communist Yugoslavia quickly became independent of the Soviet Union and communist Vietnam became independent of China). Moreover, with its own rich oil reserves and exports, it would have the economic base to support this independence.

As for the north--wouldn't an independent Kurdistan be opposed by Turkey, which fears such a state on the grounds that it will encourage and enable Kurdish separatists within Turkey itself? Perhaps. At the same time, however, a

conservative Kurdish state in Iraq need not end up supporting Kurdish insurgents in Turkey--and could probably be prevailed upon to use its influence to discourage them. Moreover, oil exports from Kurdistan could prove increasingly valuable to Turkey's economy, giving Ankara an incentive to cooperate with partition.

The United States could provide military assistance and diplomatic guidance to the Kurdish state and could also facilitate--through a variety of economic and diplomatic means--the independence of the Shia state from Iran. At the end of the day, the United States would be acting as a balancer--helping to balance the interests of Shia Iraq and Kurdistan and the interests of Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia. U.S. economic interests in a continuing flow of Persian Gulf oil to the global market would be preserved, and U.S. security interests in containing Iran would be enhanced. But the interests of more than 80 percent of the people of Iraq--that is, the Shia and the Kurds--would be enhanced also. They would be the winners in that tormented country's new order. The losers, of course, would be the Sunni Arabs of Iraq, who would have to pay for the sins of the cruel regimes that represented them in the past and the cruel insurgents whom they support today.

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